

Notes on So Sahn Taesa

Born Choe Yosin in 1520 in the city of Anju in what is now North Korea, the boy who became known as So Sahn Taesa (So Sahn means western mountain, Taesa means great teacher) was orphaned at age 10. He was taken in by a county magistrate, who sent the highly precocious child to the main Confucian university at the age of 12. Soon after, while traveling the country with schoolmates, he encountered Buddhism in a small village when an old monk asked him if he wanted to pass the examination of the empty mind. The monk then gave young Choe Yosin Buddhist sutras to study, as well as the Zen compilation *The Transmission of the Lamp*, and at that point Choe Yosin began practicing Buddhism. The precocious child, now a teenager, found himself frustrated by these texts until, at about the age of 15, he awakened and, at that point, became a monk — both the importance of sutra study, and its ultimate inadequacy, were important themes in his work, as they have been in Korean Son Buddhism since at least the time of Chinul, over three centuries earlier.

At the age of 33 So Sahn passed the advanced monk examinations. Three years later he became the leader of both the Zen and Sutra schools but, not liking administrative duties, resigned these positions when he was 38. He spent the next eleven years teaching and practicing in a number of places, finally settling at Myohyang Mountain when he was 49. Attracting thousands of students, he had seventy dharma heirs. When he was 70, a poem he'd written was thought to support a rebellion, and was called to the court to defend himself. He impressed the king so much that they developed a relationship of mutual respect and friendship. Three years later the Japanese invaded Korea, rapidly overtaking the country. The king, desperate, approached So Sahn, asking him to rally the monks into an army. The monks became a powerful fighting force, and, together with Chinese forces, defeated the Japanese, ending the invasion. So Sahn became a national hero, and remains one to this day. After the Japanese were defeated, So Sahn returned to teaching and practicing and died in 1604 while giving a dharma talk. He looked up, noticed his portrait on the wall of the dharma room, and wrote down the following poem:

80 years ago that was me.
After 80 years, am I that?

After reading the poem aloud, he died. (A less dramatic version has him writing letters to two close students not present, and then dying.)

Mirror of Zen began as a compilation of extracts from, as his student Yu Jeong wrote in an afterward, over 50 sutras and their commentaries, meant to embody the essence of Zen teachings. This compilation was an internal document designed only for So Sahn's

students. Eventually, So Sahn realized that his students could not absorb these quotations without some direction, so he added commentaries and a few poems to accompany the original 86 quotations. Again, this was meant only for his students, and was accompanied by warnings against glib interpretations. To quote from So Sahn's introduction, "Yet study these words and phrases though you may, it would be far better to attain that single word that is beyond all writings. It is a mysterious treasure outside all forms." That single word is what So Sahn is always pointing to, the word that is before speech, before thinking.

At some point, his students decided that *Mirror of Zen* deserved a wider audience. The work was copied by Zen Master Baek Un, edited by Zen Master Byeok Chon, and a number of So Sahn's other students raised enough money to engrave it on woodblocks for wider circulation. Even so, there was concern that *Mirror of Zen* not be trivialized by intellectual analysis. As Yu Beong says in his afterword to the first edition: "It must be known that our old Master always spoke of the teaching matters contained herein with utmost discretion. As if walking on the edge of a sharp knife, he actually feared that even a single word or half a phrase might end up in any such written record as this. Therefore to circulate this widely or to take pride in his ability were the last things he would have wanted.... It was distributed widely in order to repay our old Master in some humble way for his great compassion in teaching and awakening us.... The deep truth of the Buddha and the subtle dharma of the Patriarchs are like a vast ocean: If you want to search for the precious gem contained in the mouth of a great dragon living at the bottom of the sea, at what point of the vast ocean surface would you enter? And what would guide your search?"

This is the spirit in which to approach *Mirror of Zen*, as a point of entry into a vast ocean, penetrating the surface, and as a guide for our search. It contains a number of sections that can be discussed in standard ways: a catalog in section 16 of the ten sicknesses in kong-an practice (So Sahn uses *hwa-du* and *kong-an* almost interchangeably); a long (over five pages) discussion of chanting practice, which attempts to clarify the relationship between Zen and Pure Land; various places in which sutra study and Zen practice are compared (always to the advantage of Zen) and somewhat reconciled; a catalog of the different types of ways in which monks can go astray; five sections which simply catalog the five traditional schools; deep reliance on the *Blue Cliff Record* and other traditions of the Lin-Chi school; warnings not to write graffiti on bathroom walls and to wash your hands after using the toilet. But most of it is written at a high level of intensity, exhorting us to practice, warning us of grave pitfalls, and focusing us on the one thing which was never born and never dies, infinitely bright and mysterious by nature.

In fact, that is how it begins: "There is only one thing, from the very beginning, infinitely bright and mysterious by nature... It was never born and it never dies. It cannot be described or given a name."

And the last section begins:

“The sacred radiance of our original nature never darkens.
It has shined forth since beginningless time.
Do you wish to enter the gate that leads to this?
Simply do not give rise to conceptual thinking.”

Each section begins with such a quote, whose precise source is pretty much unknown to us, culled from those over fifty sutras and their commentaries that So Sahn pored through to extract the essence. With a very few exceptions (e.g., the catalog of the five schools) these quotes are uncompromising. For example, flipping at random, here is the beginning of section 61: “The Buddha once lamented, ‘Look at this! Thieves wear robes to represent my teaching, and yet they only make all kinds of intense karma by selling me for their own personal profit!’”

So too, So Sahn’s commentaries are, with rare exceptions, uncompromising. For example, again at semi-random, consider section 28. It begins with the quotation: “Practicing the Way with a deluded mind merely adds to one’s ignorance.” And the commentary reads: “How can you say that you practice correctly if you have not yet attained even a little insight? Enlightenment and gradual cultivation feed each other like oil and fire, guide each other like eyes and feet.”

Reading this book and practice also feed each other, like oil and fire, guiding each other like eyes and feet. The great 20th century monk Baek Jeong, who wrote the Korean translation on which Hyang Gak Sunim’s translation is based, speaks of how precious this book was to him, beginning when he was a young monk staying up late copying it for his own use. In Korea it has a special status in the training of monks and nuns; in some sense, if you could only read one book, this would be it. Commentary and analysis are superfluous. *Mirror of Zen* exists not to make a point, but to point directly. Even saying “point directly to our true nature” is putting legs on a snake.

by Zen Master Bon Hae (*Judy Roitman*)

Acknowledgment: Much of the detail of So Sahn’s biography comes from Becky Bernen’s 1978 Harvard senior thesis, which came my way through Zen Master Hae Kwang, who got it from Zen Master Dae Kwang, who got it from the Providence Zen Center library, where it was given as a gift. The alert reader will note that this version differs somewhat from the hagiographic and temporally vague legend that appears in the 20th century Korean introduction to *Mirror of Zen*.